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The Envelope-Steamers

The ways of security are dark. Those who protect the land of the free and the home of the brave are not like us. Our stalwart lads at the CIA and their glorious allies in the Mafia may not have nailed Fidel Castro but, by God, they have kept this great country safe from Senator Frank Church's mother-in-law.

As is known far, wide and nervously, the spook works on the other side of the river conducted an illegal mail-opening operation between 1952 and 1973. Included were letters of the great and the obscure like you and me.

James Angleton said, in testimony before the Senate Intelligence Committee, that the idea was to keep a beady eye on contacts between U.S. citizens and Communist countries. Looking for conspiracies, one supposes.

But opening other people's mail is considered naughty in this country. It is, in fact, against the law.

Mr. Angleton, a former CIA counter-intelligence honcho who looks and talks like T.S. Eliot in cloak and dagger, said that, to him, it was "inconceivable that a secret intelligence arm of the government had to comply with all the overt orders of the government."

Let us, in deference to the rhapso-

dies of the other side's argument, concede that point for a moment—although it shouldn't be conceded until it is properly wired up with all sorts of qualifications.

However, if we conceded Mr. Angleton's point, we are still left with the Potomac dumb-dumb factor. That factor enters into the affairs of state when a procedure that was instituted to accomplish a specific purpose continues with no relationship to the specific purpose for which it was instituted.

In the matter of the CIA's envelope-steaming, the Potomac dumb-dumb factor was vigorously at work. For instance; Senator Church, while on a visit to Moscow, wrote a letter to his mother-in-law, Mrs. Chase Clark, of Boise. The glue-finger squad seized the letter, opened it, read it, copied it and then sent the original on to Mrs. Clark.

Following the inexorable logic that lay behind the CIA's mail-tampering operation, we can all sleep more soundly in our beds once the conspiratorial link has been established between the arch-fiends of the Kremlin and a frail, white-haired old lady in Boise. That was the original purpose, right?

Right. Beat a confession out of her.